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Workplace Bathroom as Think Tank

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Recommended Citation (OVERRIDE)

Turow, J (1998). Workplace Bathroom as Think Tank. Los Angeles Times.

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Workplace Bathroom as Think Tank

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Workplace Bathroom as Private Think Tank; Television: Toilet humor endures, but on some shows the lavatory is a personal discussion sanctuary.

Turow, Joseph . Los Angeles Times ; Los Angeles, Calif. [Los Angeles, Calif]02 Mar 1998: 8.

[ProQuest document link](#)

ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Bathroom humor is far more common than social criticism on prime-time television. Controversial public issues seem almost taboo on the home tube, while toilet buffoonery scatters across the TV landscape. This season, though, a growing number of TV writers have been using the bathroom to quietly raise an important social issue that their medium typically ignores: the tensions that exist between the workplace and the rest of people's lives.

When it comes to the bathroom, television has journeyed far from the time in the mid-1950s when NBC censored Jack Paar for saying "water closet" on "The Tonight Show" (he walked off for two weeks in protest), and the moment in the early 1970s when Archie Bunker made history with TV's first toilet flush.

The world of work has always been a key part of TV's universe. During the past decade, though, the workplace has come to dominate characters' worlds more than ever. In series such as "Chicago Hope," "ER," "Law & Order," "Brooklyn South," "Suddenly Susan," "NewsRadio," "Veronica's Closet," "Spin City," "Just Shoot Me" and "Ally McBeal," people spend virtually all their time at work or with colleagues from the job.

FULL TEXT

Bathroom humor is far more common than social criticism on prime-time television. Controversial public issues seem almost taboo on the home tube, while toilet buffoonery scatters across the TV landscape. This season, though, a growing number of TV writers have been using the bathroom to quietly raise an important social issue that their medium typically ignores: the tensions that exist between the workplace and the rest of people's lives.

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"South Park's" kids watch dancing feces on a Comedy Central Christmas episode. Drew Carey's crew virtually moons viewers during a striptease act on the ABC series. A character on ABC's "Soul Man" expels gas loudly as part of the punch lines that end an episode.

As these examples suggest, tired, sophomoric humor has been the most obvious outcome of this cultural breakthrough. It is only when the WC is linked with the workplace that things get interesting and potentially provocative.

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come to dominate characters' worlds more than ever. In series such as "Chicago Hope," "ER," "Law & Order," "Brooklyn South," "Suddenly Susan," "NewsRadio," "Veronica's Closet," "Spin City," "Just Shoot Me" and "Ally McBeal," people spend virtually all their time at work or with colleagues from the job.

There is a seed of truth here: For most viewers, work has become a kind of home. Long hours, multiple jobs and pressures to ratchet up productivity in an era of downsizing have meant that millions of women and men experience the bulk of their waking lives at their sites of employment.

Even if work is enjoyable (and for many it is not), decisions about child care, parent care, home care and personal grooming must often be made on the job.

Yet this need is counterbalanced by a fear that tending to domestic issues implies less than full attention to the job. Will other workers take advantage of this "weakness"? Will management relegate an executive pursuing such activities to the dreaded (but rarely acknowledged) "mommy" or "daddy" track? Is there a way to maintain privacy but still indulge in the need to confide in someone in this atmosphere of mixed allegiances?

TV tends to repress these issues. People hardly ever see the intrusion of the personal into the occupational as a problem.

The potential for tension certainly does exist. While "NYPD Blue," "ER," "Veronica's Closet," "Ally McBeal" and "Spin City" have workplaces that appear open and friendly, these sites can be suffocating when an individual needs personal space. In the detectives' room and the ER floor, the bustle and physical layout combine to afford few places for privacy. Characters in "Veronica's Closet," "Ally McBeal" and "Spin City" have private offices, but it doesn't seem to matter. Everyone in the company moves through them freely, without knocking or asking permission.

That's where the bathroom enters the picture. Evidently not wanting to explicitly contradict the open atmosphere that defines these shows, their creators see the bathroom as a way to inject a place for privacy and confidentiality.

In "NYPD Blue," Det. Sipowicz stands near the sinks of the otherwise vacant bathroom/locker room after an embarrassing racial incident and confides to his partner a rush of memories about African Americans that would be inappropriate outside the bathroom door. In "Ally McBeal," where the bathroom is coed, a husband asks his wife if he satisfies her in bed. Before answering, she checks the stalls to make sure no one is there.

These are well-crafted plot lines, but they only hint at the issue that links them: a society where allegiance to the workplace creates tensions in the lives of many people. Right now the topic seems to be mostly confined, albeit creatively, to TV's bathrooms. It will be interesting to see if it ever gets out.

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Credit: SPECIAL TO THE TIMES